

# Past, future and change: Contemporary analysis of evolving media scapes



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# On the Societal Impact of ICTs: The gap between Journalists' Analyses and Research Conclusions – the Example of “Arab Revolutions”

Bertrand Cabedoche

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Timothy Garton Ash, the British historian and journalist, argues that journalists write the first draft of history (Garton Ash, 2001). According to the French newspaper *Libération*, he even notes that “*more and more researchers believe what they read in newspapers*”, to justify his own work to reconcile these two professional communities and put an end to the absurd idea of a cold war between them. Nevertheless, an uncareful quotation of Garton Ash can also be dangerous in a PhD work, if it leads to confusion between the fields' different practices and knowledge levels. This is not said in order to develop what Freud called the “narcissism of minor differences”, but to insist on the need to maintain our vigilance constantly; within social sciences and humanities, particularly in Information Sciences and Media Studies, we must remain suspicious about media content, which we must consider first and foremost as human constructions (Charaudeau, 1997).

## 2. AN AMBIVALENT ANALYSIS OF “ARAB REVOLUTIONS” IN MAINSTREAM WESTERN MEDIA

Media commentaries of the “Arab revolutions” in the mainstream Western media are significant examples from this point of view. Relatively quickly, researchers have offered their own analyses of the recent events relating to the Arab world and the descriptions of those events in Western media (Allagui, Kuebler, 2011; Musso, 2011; Asdourian, Badillo, Bourgeois, 2011; Dahmen-Jarrin, 2011; Ferjani, 2011; Mattelart, 2011; Cabedo-

che, 2011). Most analyses so far have reached the same overall conclusion: that the reporting of these events has been ‘technologically deterministic’ in its view of the part played by social media.

## 2.1. A DOMINANT MEDIA REPRESENTATION IN TERMS OF ‘CYBER-REVOLUTIONS’

The image made the front pages of many newspapers: a veiled Egyptian woman brandishing a computer keyboard during the revolutions in Cairo, as a new standard characteristics of social movements. The social actors themselves were the first proponents of this type of analysis. For example, the Egyptian Wael Ghonim, author of the Facebook page *We are all Khaled Said* (named after a young man beaten to death by police in Alexandria in June 2010), has defined this movement as “a revolution 2.0”. Hundreds of newspaper articles have also repeated this discourse, when talking about an “Internet revolution”, with variations such as “Twitter revolution” (for Egypt), “Facebook revolution” (in Tunisia), “Cyber-revolution” or “Cyber-dissidence”. Many journalists have analysed the Internet as a principal vector in the Tunisian revolution. The blogger Sofiane Belhadj has been credited as a major actor in the *Jasmine Revolution*, especially for translating and rewriting WikiLeaks on Facebook, then proclaimed “a liberated territory”.

A first level of explanation of this media followership – and also conformism – can be arrived at from the theory of co-construction (Charaudeau, 1997). In a newsroom, what is written is based on two types of imaginaries: What does my audience know and need to know in order to be able to understand (*imaginaire de savoir*)<sup>1</sup>? What does my audience want and what can attract and maintain this audience? (*imaginaire de désir*)<sup>2</sup>. These two imaginaries also lead journalists to add ‘genuining effects’ (in order to appear true) and ‘attracting effects’ (in order to capture and retain the audience). From this perspective, the impacts related to ICTs were real: because they had neither the time nor the means to leave their desks and prove their claims, Western media developed ‘genuining effects’, for instance when they were merely rewriting Wikileaks revelations about the collusion of Western governments and the Ben Ali regime. At the same time, they developed ‘attracting effects’, with the strong and symbolic image of the self-immolation of the young street merchant, Mohamed Bouazizi, in Sidi Bouzid.

1 ‘Knowledge imaginary’

2 ‘Desire imaginary’

This first level of explanation does not, however, seem complete, mainly because it is too mediacentric. As a complementary perspective, some authors nowadays refer to the concept of 'generalised public relations', which points to the fact that establishing social visibility is more and more a task for non-journalists as well (Miege, 2007: 19-20). In Tunisia, the primary producers of information were the social actors themselves: "We have seen the creation of the Twitter hashtag #sidibouzi, and discovered the key to gaining knowledge about events in Tunisia. Until December 25, 2010, very little information came from the international media" (Dahmen-Jarrin, 2011). And the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi only became a piece of news in Western, traditional media when the entire world of Arab social media was already talking about it.

## 2.2. A READING REINFORCED BY THE EVOLUTION OF ACTIVISM AND JOURNALISM

To some extent, the Arab revolutions appeared to be the advent of a new participatory culture, based on an informational mobilisation from below (Cardon, Granjon, 2010: 137-138) and the rise of amateur practices (Flichy, 2010). Even better, Tunisia appeared as an ideal case, given the best telecommunication penetration anywhere on the African continent, with 80% of the population mobile phone subscribers and 3.5 million Internet users in 2010. Tunisia was also an ideal as a country, as the disputed authorities had just – in a very symbolic way – arrested a few bloggers and hacked email and Facebook accounts. And indeed, the 'militant expressivism' – as it has been described (Blondeau and Allard, 2007: 19) – was fully exposed with the help of technologies such as MMS, Bluetooth, profiles in Twitter, transfers via USB and memory cards.

Of course, questions were immediately asked about the reliability of this information, pulled from the street, from people without any journalistic training, without any professional experience, without any ethics and, finally, without any trace. Nevertheless, transnational media followed. *Al Jazeera* immediately understood this new media environment, making use of collaborative platforms and other individual contributions, something that Western media also harnessed later: *France 24* was positioned for the Libyan rebels, *BBC World* had recruited a Tunisian activist without any links to journalism. The result of this media excitement was the mobilisation of insurgents using mobile communication devices to outbid and take advantage of mass effects through transnational channels.

Thus, in a way, the Arab Spring suggests that information technologies play a key role in informing and mobilising social actors, especially in countries where press freedom is limited. For instance, a recent report (CIMA, 2011) shows that freedom of expression has expanded somewhat with the help of organisations dedicated to Internet freedoms. A large volume of commentary has also pointed to the Arab revolts, sustained by Twitter, Facebook and the “Internet generation”, as symbols of the era of ‘individual mass communication’, as Castells calls it (Castells, 2010).

This thesis has been widely adopted in North America and Europe. Convinced that access to information releases and builds democracies, *Newsweek* announced the fall of the Iranian regime in 1995, with the heading “*Chats and chadors*”. Almost 15 years later, during the Iranian insurrection in 2009, the *Wall Street Journal* diagnosed that “*this could not have happened without Twitter*”, and the *New York Times* saw insurgents “*shooting tweets*” instead of bullets. Now, with the examples of Tunisia and Egypt, the discourse is strikingly similar: “*The same ingredients – a large number of people connected or contactable with their mobile phone – are, certainly, present in many countries*”, especially in many developing countries<sup>3</sup>.

Thus, we could be entering into a world of ‘generalised communication’ and ‘full transparency’, the products of a pure and perfect ‘information and e-democracy system’. But many researchers in the humanities and social sciences are now referring to a paradigm: the exclusive attribution of the overthrow of Ben Ali and Mubarak to digital and traditional media constitutes a denial of the complexity of the ongoing transformations. This could be an example of a scientifically questionable and much discussed ‘technological determinism’.

### 3. A HEALTHY DISTANCING FROM EVERY KIND OF DETERMINISM

Journalists close to academic environments were the first observers to write with a more reserved tone: Internet, or social networks, do not build revolutions. Public self-immolations, banned political parades, Tahrir Square occupations... are primarily physical expressions of popular dismay and protests. And the Arab Spring is not a “Al Jazeera revolution”, just as the Iranian protest movement of 2009 was not limited to Twitter,

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3 Cf. “La révolution Facebook : le printemps arabe et le futur politique des réseaux sociaux” [The Facebook revolution: the Arab Spring and the political future of social networks], ParisTech Review, 28 February 2011 <http://www.paristechreview.com/2011/02/28/revolution-facebook-printemps-arabe-futur-politique-reseaux-sociaux/>



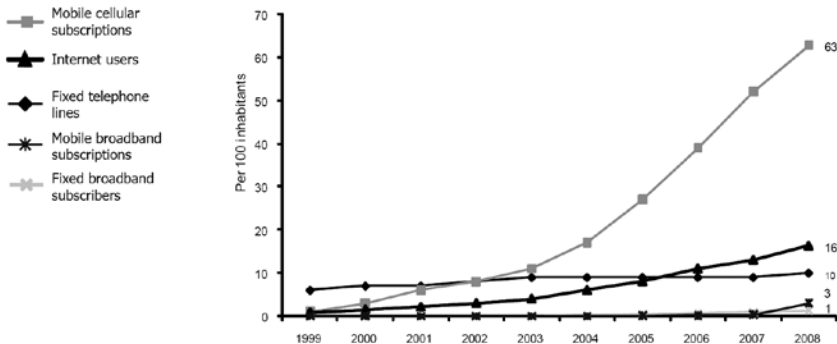
nor was the Tunisian revolt limited to Facebook (Corbucci, 2011). Consequently, a large majority of the academia – especially information and communication sciences researchers – are sceptical about the paradigm of a so-called ‘information society’, so easily quoted in mainstream media. The distance is manifest: “*2.0 revolutions have not occurred*” (Ferjani, 2011)!

### 3.1. A RESERVE AGAINST THE GLOBALISATION OF THE PROPOSAL

Academic distancing concerns, on the one hand, the forced modelling of the proposal. The Arab world is a mosaic comprising countries that are very different from one another. On the other hand, as elsewhere, public opinions are fragmented, volatile and subjected to a permanent recomposition (El Oifi, 2011). Finally, Internet penetration is a very heterogeneous phenomenon across countries: e.g. Libya possesses a Warfalla tribal system of communication which is more efficient than the Internet (Mathieu Guidere, in Huyghe, 2011). Morocco, where one of the limitations is the illiteracy rate (67% in rural areas), had an Internet subscription rate of just 1.5% in 2009, far behind Tunisia, with a penetration rate of 4.03%.

Research shows that outside the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain, the Internet is still beyond reach for a majority of Arab people, with GDP per capita at below 3000 US dollars. Even in Tunisia, analyses of usage show that insurgent practices by actors on the web mainly originated among one category of the population: an elite of highly educated young people, driven by a demand for dignity and honour, led by a need for participation and a desire to take part in technological and political globalisation (Badie, 2011), with sufficient means to acquire a mobile Internet and the skills to use it. Only mobile phone use is generalised in all Arab countries: in 2009 researchers recorded a subscription rate of more than 95% in Tunisia and 67% in Egypt.

**Figure 1: ICT developments in the Arab States 1999-2008 (data: Information Society Statistical Profiles 2009: Arab States, International Telecommunication Union)**



A second academic reservation concerns the technological determinism – or a ‘technomessianism’ (Balandier, 2001: 20) – which governs representations of the Arab revolts. Instead of being the result of inherently liberating power networks, the political and social changes are, first and foremost, the result of social mobilisation (Ferjani, 2011). Particularly in Europe and North America, where the technological environment is more familiar than in complex Arab societies, the utopia of the ‘Facebook revolution’ appeared as a collective imaginary, which perceived the media to have unlimited power over human beings. While all the research into reception mechanisms refutes this, the dominant belief persists within popular discourse. In particular, since the late 1990s, the Arab world has witnessed a process of public opinion empowerment. Hypotheses, which give a central role to new media in the Arab revolutions, underestimate, on the one hand, structural sociological transformations (e.g. urbanisation, literacy) and, on the other hand, the specifics of individual motivations and the large variety of tactical options for individuals.

Thus, it becomes necessary to consider the multiple and sometimes conflicting uses of tools: these depend less on the nature and potentials of these technologies than on users’ motivations, strategies and tactics (El Oifi, 2011). Researchers easily demonstrate how unpopular repressive Arab regimes also use the Internet, or block access to the Web, or ban the use of Facebook, e.g. in Syria and Libya. Internet features such as geoloca-

tion tools or IP addresses were used to identify and arrest people hacking into government website and vice versa, to hack the accounts of e-mail or Facebook insurgents (which was the case in Tunisia), or to call for political rallies and then to arrest those who obeyed the false messages. Forty-five experts were paid by the Egyptian Ministry for Internal Security to monitor five million Facebook users. Kareem Amer in Egypt, al-Tal Mallouhi in Syria and Ali Abduleman, accused together with some 230 others in Bahrain of terrorism, for example, were imprisoned and mistreated because of their online writing. Moreover, governments have enlisted transnational media and communication technologies to serve the interests of their diplomacy and try to influence the future of the Arab world (Ferjani, 2011).

### 3.2. AN ANTI-DETERMINISTIC PARADIGM CONSISTING OF COMMUNICATION SCIENCES AND MEDIA STUDIES

The argument is not new. In fact, it constitutes one of the main paradigms in Information and Communication Sciences. It says that one cannot analyse a contested space out of its structural constraints (Miege, 2010: 109). Still, history repeats itself, over and over again: for instance, in media analyses of the *Popolo Viola* movement in Italy (Musso, 2003), in reports from the Iranian revolt in 2009, and in the media coverage of the revolts in Tunisia (Dahmen-Jarrin, 2011) and Egypt (Castagnac, 2011). Thus, seeking to establish a causal relationship between Internet penetration rates and the Arab revolts is now considered to be a perilous exercise, as Pierre Musso has summarised (Musso, 2003).

To at least some extent, journalists' lack of contact with academic research explains the autistic media runaway. It took the publication of Evgeny Morozov's book debunking the idea of a "Twitter revolution" in Iran, written before the Arab spring and edited in January 2011 (Morozov, 2011), finally to inspire the first media distanciations. But occasionally – the general media landscape was still defending the thesis of a technology based revolution.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Many researchers in communication and information sciences declaim that to accept the technological determinism thesis is to deny social innovation. Conversely, one cannot ignore the role that ICTs have played in

the Arab Spring, although they are not responsible for everything (Aaker, Smith, Adler, 2010). Digital devices are no miracle tools, but they can provide real opportunities for civic interactions, without promising the quick installation of democracy (Dahlgren, 2005: 151).

When being asked about the Arab revolutions, researchers had to appreciate the role of ICTs: they do not replace opposition political parties, trade unions and other forms of social organisation. But they have encouraged the spread of information among users themselves. In particular, the general explosion of mobile telephony in Arab countries could offset the Internet divide. For example, in Tunisia, Facebook and mobile phones were at some points the one and only channel of transmission, used for sharing information and crucial logistical data (e.g. roads and checkpoints to avoid). Enabled by social networks, “weak links”, nevertheless, could accompany, amplify communication and allow groupings. Social media have created stories about victims and aroused emotion. They have made ‘vox populi’ audible, even if the phenomenon was partial. Interpersonal communication relayed information from satellite TV channels and helped to disseminate information. Therefore, rather than simply accepting representations describing ICTs as natural tools of democratisation, we should consider those ICTs as power issues, used by actors pursuing conflicting objectives (Ferjani, 2011; Mattelart, 2011). Their impact in the Arab world should be understood in terms of new forms of expression, rather than in terms of institutional change. But such nuanced insights were certainly rare in the journalistic coverage of these events, and they will continue to be so as long as journalism does not realise the importance of renouncing absolute, definitive, monocausal – technological, social, geopolitical – explanations, and opens up to micro, meso and macro levels. Simultaneously!

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